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**Improving inclusion in employment for people with Asperger syndrome:  
Towards practices that recognise theories of Asperger syndrome and  
contemporary employment**

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**Abstract**

Asperger syndrome, a social and life-long disability, has yet to find its way into academic research that surrounds contemporary work and employment. The extant literature is typically over-characterised by psychological perspectives of Asperger syndrome and an overly descriptive and atheoretical employment-related framework. As such, the purpose of this paper, via discussions of the main theories that surround Asperger syndrome and a sample of literature based on the sociology of contemporary employment, is to propose a more holistic means to improve the employment prospects for people who have Asperger syndrome. The main finding from the proposed paper is to suggest strategies to increase employment rates and the quality of working life for people with Asperger syndrome must more accurately reflect the nature of contemporary employment. In practical terms this suggests experts on contemporary work and employment need to be far more central to the design and implementation of employment-related support strategies.

## **Introduction**

According to the National Autistic Society, Asperger syndrome is a form of autism, which is a lifelong disability that affects how a person makes sense of the world, processes information and relates to other people (National Autistic Society, undated). One of the most evident and defining features of Asperger syndrome is the presence of marked deficiencies in social interactions, communication and behaviours (Higgins et al., 2008). It has been said, however, that many of the problems associated with Asperger syndrome become more evident when the individual experiences stress or change (Attwood, 2007). On this basis it is no big surprise to find that many people with Asperger syndrome have great difficulties securing competitive employment opportunities and holding down a job long-term. Indeed, one study suggests 88 per cent of adults with a high functioning form of autism are not in full-time employment (1) (Barnard et al., 2001). This is nearly double the unemployment rate of 48 per cent for the wider disabled population (Office for National Statistics, 2009, cited in Shaw Trust, 2010) and eleven times higher than the current UK unemployment rate of 7.9 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2011). It should also be noted, however, that difficulties finding work and coping with employment is not a problem unique to people with Asperger syndrome or the wider disabled population. As Noon and Blyton (2007) suggest, all working people at some time or other have to learn to cope with the uncertainty and stresses of navigating employment markets, as well as the need to find ways to cope with the pressures, monotony and powerlessness nature of contemporary employment. This suggests we should not underestimate the harsh realities of employment, as well as how the harsh realities can be conceptualised, when seeking ways to reduce the employment-related problems faced by a person with Asperger syndrome.

In recent times there has been a small yet noticeable rise in literature that sets out to consider and provide solutions for the many employment-related problems faced by people with Asperger syndrome. Examples of employment-related problems identified in the most recent crop of literature are wide-ranging, vary somewhat and include but not restricted to the following. For some the problems with employment begin with the mismanagement of the transition from full-time education to employment (e.g. see Jennes-Coussens et al., 2006; Patterson and Rafferty, 2001). Even if transition is conducted effectively there can be problems with appropriateness and availability of support for adults with Asperger syndrome when faced with selection processes or when faced with problems when in employment (e.g. see Beardon and Edmonds, 2007; National Autistic Society, 2005; Nesbitt, 2000). Meyer (2001), moreover, argues that problems can occur in employment because individuals with Asperger syndrome can be viewed by colleagues as arrogant, not asking for help and lacking assertiveness. A more emergent view is that many problems stem from the employers' side in that many employers, for example, see people with Asperger syndrome as unemployable (Austin et al., 2008), screen out prospective candidates who have declared their disability (Meyer, 2001), employ too many intolerant line managers (Grandin and Duffy, 2004) and too readily claim ignorance or shy away from making 'reasonable adjustments' under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 (now the Equality Act 2010) (Graham, 2008). A further suggestion is that the rules of social security militate against people with Asperger syndrome taking temporary jobs, which may help individuals in the process of gaining valuable experience of employment (Aylott et al., 2008; Ridley et al., 2005).

Despite the growth of literature that attempts to reduce employment-related problems for people with Asperger syndrome the literature is noted by one universal flaw. While the texts are evidently written by professionals and lay people who appear to have a thorough knowledge of Asperger syndrome, it is also equally if not more evident that, as Roulstone

(2005) suggests, this body of literature insufficiently engages with a mass of social science literature on the realities of employment. As such, the main direction of this paper is to suggest that attempts to consider what can be done to understand the many problems faced by adults with Asperger syndrome in relation to employment will be limited (evidenced by the very low employment rates of people with Asperger syndrome) unless equal recognition is given to the theories of Asperger syndrome and theories that relate to the realities of employment.

To attempt to do this the following will be done. Firstly, there will be a broader discussion of the theories of Asperger syndrome so that one side of the problem can be stated and understood. Secondly, there will be a selective, yet purposeful, discussion of theories that relate to the realities of employment, or the main and social context of the problem. A third and final section will bring together the previous sections by summarising all the main points and making suggestions about what can be done to reduce the employment-related problems faced by many people with Asperger syndrome.

### **The theories of Asperger syndrome**

While it is widely known and acknowledged that Hans Asperger should be credited with initial attempts to theorise Asperger syndrome, discussions in this section begin and advance on from the work of Lorna Wing that emerged circa 1980. Indeed, an early major contribution of Wing (1981) was to go beyond highly descriptive accounts and set out new diagnostic criteria for Asperger syndrome, as well as promote the idea of Asperger syndrome being part of a wider spectrum of autistic disorders. As such, since the early 1980s it has been common to think of people with Asperger syndrome as having a ‘triad of impairments’, or life-long problems with social interaction, communication and imagination. Since then Wing’s work

has been further developed by writers such as Gillberg (1991) who came up with an expanded diagnostic criteria involving social impairment, narrow interest, compulsive needs for introducing routines and interests, speech and language peculiarities, non-verbal communication problems and motor clumsiness. According to Attwood (2007), Gillberg's diagnostic criteria have become the choice for many experienced clinicians.

However, in more recent times, attempts have been made to question this widely used medical model of Asperger syndrome, mainly because of the negative and largely unchallenged terminology associated with Asperger syndrome, such as constant reference to 'disorders' and 'impairments'. The medical model of Asperger syndrome is also widely criticised for emphasising the problems of the individual and under-emphasising the contribution of social context to the problem. For instance, Beardon (2007) argues that experts should think very carefully about applying the terms 'disorder' and 'impairment' to people with Asperger syndrome, as disorder may in fact also be a widely unacknowledged 'difference' and a communication impairment merely a label placed upon a tiny and largely voiceless part of the population by a powerful majority. However, while it is evident that new ideas that surround social models of disability are emerging (e.g. Oliver and Barnes, 2010; Terzi, 2004; Tregaskis, 2002), it appears that the means by which health and educational professionals come to understand Asperger syndrome is heavily biased towards a useful, yet incomplete take on disability.

### *Theory of mind*

Aside from the diagnostic side there are believed to be a range of conventional psychological concepts used to help us better understand and explain the many problems associated with Asperger syndrome. The first of the main psychological concepts involves problems associated with 'theory of mind'. In this instance it is believed that people with Asperger

syndrome tend not to feel the same range of emotions, or do not recognise that they feel the same range of emotions, as the wider population. An important outcome from this situation is that people with Asperger syndrome may struggle with the idea that others have thoughts and feelings different than their own (Fast, 2004). In an employment situation this could mean a person with Asperger syndrome has problems with a dishonest customer, colleague or manager because they know themselves to be honest and rule-abiding (Hawkins, 2004). Another example involves understanding that an employee with Asperger syndrome may not appreciate that fellow employees have their own thoughts and feelings, resulting in the employee with Asperger syndrome making open, personal and possibly offending comments about a colleague. As Hendrickx (2009: 15) emphasises, employees with Asperger syndrome may struggle and need help to 'silence this inner voice'.

#### *Executive function*

A second psychological concept used to understand and explain Asperger syndrome is that of the 'executive function'. According to Attwood (2007: 234), executive function is another widely used psychological term that relates to organisational and planning abilities, working memory, inhibition and impulse control, self-reflection and self-monitoring, time management and prioritising, understanding complex or abstract concepts, as well as using new strategies. It is said that many people with Asperger syndrome are prone to poor executive functioning and as a result may struggle to focus on more than one thing at a time. For instance, Bissonnette (2008) believes people with Asperger syndrome may find jobs that require 'multi-tasking' difficult to master and likely to require some level of support organising time and tasks. Hendrickx (2009), moreover, believes problems with executive functioning can lead to the person with Asperger syndrome having a tendency towards black and white thinking and if some part of the job is not done perfectly then this is seen by the

employee with Asperger syndrome as some sort of failure. As such, a line manager or fellow employees may get concerned when anxiety levels of the employee with Asperger syndrome unexpectedly surface.

### *Central coherence*

A third psychological concept used to understand and explain Asperger syndrome is that of 'central coherence'. People with Asperger syndrome are believed to have a 'weak' central coherence in that the individual may have little difficulty memorising masses of facts, yet may have significant problems making sense of all the facts (Gillberg, 2007). Further, it is also suggested that the problem associated with central coherence become more acute when it comes to trying to process 'social' and 'emotional' facts (Attwood, 2007). This may not be a major problem for many employment-related situations or certain jobs, yet it could well be a very serious problem where an employee needs to see the 'bigger picture' (Bissonnette, 2008). An example of a narrow focus of attention is provided by Graham (2008) where a person with Asperger syndrome understands their specific individual role very well, yet struggles to grasp how the individual fits in with the wider agenda and functioning of their allotted team.

### *Over-sensitisation*

A further problematic side to Asperger syndrome concerns a higher than usual propensity for the individual to be overloaded by light, textures, tastes and smells and leading to a temporary breakdown in the nervous system (Meyer, 2001). Indeed, people with Asperger syndrome can often have problems with sound sensitivity, tactile sensitivity, sensitivity to taste and smell and visual sensitivity (Attwood, 2007). Below Grandin and Duffy (2004: 11-12) explain how everyday sounds can make life very difficult for the person with Asperger syndrome:



‘Sounds such as those coming from a smoke alarm hurt like a dentist drill hitting a nerve. That is, in most individuals with autism spectrum disorders the sensory system does not work in an organized fashion. Instead, sensory message may course through the nervous system, bombarding the brain with an overload of information, or too little information, which can be just as bad...The result can be a lot of anxiety, confusion and subsequently upset or irritable behaviors for both children and adults with autism.’

According to Attwood (2007) there are three types of noise that people with Asperger syndrome can find unpleasant: sudden and unexpected noises, high pitched continuous noises and complex or multiple sounds typical of social gatherings. In the employment setting some say this is equivalent to forcing a person with Asperger syndrome into an unsuitable environment and over time could threaten the employee’s mental health and emotional stability (Edmonds and Beardson, 2008). What is more, as Hendrickx (2009) notes, sensory problems do not begin and end in the workplace, and many people with Asperger syndrome may end up with a lateness problem after becoming over-sensitised travelling to work on crowded public transport.

#### *A positive side to a social disability?*

So far the discussion suggests that Asperger syndrome should primarily be understood as the irrevocable difficulties inherent in people with Asperger syndrome. Before moving on to discuss theories of contemporary employment and a later discussion of what can be done to reduce the employment-related problems associated with Asperger syndrome, it would be worthwhile discussing the many employment-related strengths of people with Asperger syndrome. Such a discussion is required as it will provide equally important and relevant details of the personal attributes of people with Asperger syndrome.

Unlike in the case of the problems associated with Asperger syndrome, the positives associated with Asperger syndrome appear more randomly in the literature. Indeed, it could be said that the majority of the academic literature on Asperger syndrome and employment, despite exhibiting a strong and supportive view on inclusive forms of employment, tend to be

anecdotal, focus on stereotypes of people with Asperger syndrome and exclude the enabling role of third parties. In reality the ‘positives’ of employing people with Asperger syndrome tend to be constructed by passionate, individual enthusiasts or organisations set up to defend and further the interests of a vulnerable societal group. Simone (2010), for example, argues, perhaps in a slightly condescending manner, that people with Asperger syndrome possess nine ‘gifts and abilities’ that employers should be made more aware of. It is argued in this instance that employees with Asperger syndrome tend to be able to focus on tasks for extended periods of time, have a genuine desire to fit in, develop ideas that are not biased towards pleasing an in-group, can find meaning in confusion, are able to visualise large-scale projects, pay attention to detail, are brutally honest and generally put logic above emotion. Hawkins (2004), however, in a similarly potentially condescending manner, refers to the ‘magic’ that people with Asperger syndrome can bring to employment settings. There is no real attempt to conceptualise what magic is, yet it is portrayed in terms of how the unique personality and work ethic of the employee with Asperger syndrome can have a positive effect on the wider workforce. A further example is provided by Fast (2004) who suggests there are enormous gains to be made by employers who offer employment that matches the special interests of the person with Asperger syndrome.

For the National Autistic Society people with autism and Asperger syndrome are presented to employers as the ‘undiscovered workforce’ (National Autistic Society, 2004). The following statement highlights the skills and attributes the National Autistic Society (2004: 3) believe most employers have little or no knowledge of:

‘...many people with autism are good at paying close attention to detail and are meticulous about routines, rules and accuracy – meaning they are often extremely reliable, and can excel at jobs such as accounting, where consistent procedures and precision are vital. Other people with autism enjoy repetitive tasks (whether basic or complex) and perform very well in fields such as IT or administration.’

Such views are echoed in the work of Rendell (2010) who believes people with Asperger syndrome can revel in routine and predictable employment. Further, it is also argued here that people with Asperger syndrome are usually equally capable of employment that involves logical thinking, tasks based on order, sequencing, organisation and systems maintenance.

Ultimately, it is evident that substantive evidence to suggest people with Asperger syndrome can successfully engage with competitive employment is thin on the ground, although it is quite reasonable to believe such research will eventually emerge over time. However, one such study exists and involves a Danish-based company called *Specialisterne* – a fully commercial organisation that specialises in software testing and 75 per cent of its workforce either has Asperger syndrome or a high-functioning form of autism. Generally, Austin et al.'s (2008) study centres on the founder of *Specialisterne* who reaffirms the beliefs of the National Autistic Society (2004) in that people with Asperger syndrome have skills that deserve to be made visible and accessible to employers. The specific skills in question include a strong memory, a capacity to concentrate on detail and a willingness to submit an exacting standard. It could be said that this particular example of employing people with Asperger syndrome has minimal generalisability or applicability, however, it should nevertheless reveal to employers the typical strengths of people with Asperger syndrome and that these core strengths are by no means industry or employer specific.

### **Contemporary employment and new challenges for employees with Asperger syndrome**

In amongst and central to the mass of social science literature on the realities of contemporary employment is labour process analysis. Labour process analysis is an approach to studying work organisations that emphasises employer control over labour as a response to less controllable external market pressures (Thompson, 1989). A strength of labour process

analysis is that it is not an approach centred on providing a constant stream of advice and solutions to managers (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). It is an approach that disproportionately recognises the role and interests of the employee in the generation of company profits or reaching non-profit-related organisational targets (Delbridge, 2006). It is generally applicable, yet appears particularly relevant in the case of people with Asperger syndrome because, as Watson (2008) informs, it is pre-supposed in labour process analysis that employers operating in competitive markets retain a propensity to constrain the employee's potential for self-realisation. Indeed, it would be quite reasonable to argue that extraordinary high levels of unemployment and under-employment is clear evidence of employers constraining even the most basic potential of people of adult age with Asperger syndrome. However, space for discussing labour process analysis in relation to Asperger syndrome is limited and therefore what follows concentrates on just a few yet important and emergent themes associated with labour process analysis. Labour process themes to be discussed include debates about new forms of work organisation and emergent forms of employer control.

#### *Contemporary forms of work organisation*

It is reasonable to suggest that mass production approaches to the organisation of work, such as Fordism and Taylorism, was widely embraced in the industrial world, in the twentieth century (Watson, 2006). However, towards the end of the twentieth century, many thought scientific management approaches to organising work to be inflexible and incapable of delivering on the demands of mass markets and more sophisticated forms of consumerism (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). Further, there is also significant evidence to suggest Fordist and Tayloristic modes of organising work created excessive and difficult to control levels of industrial conflict and absenteeism, mainly because work activities were often highly

segmented, allowed the employee little discretion and work performance was closely monitored (Noon and Blyton, 2007). Indeed, the 1980s saw academics beginning to debate whether the industrial world was witnessing a fundamental and permanent change in the nature of work organisation, in that the dominant mode of organising work was steadily being replaced by practices entitled ‘neo-Fordism’ and ‘post-Fordism’. As Grint (2005: 302) notes:

‘Fordism represents the archetypal assembly line production system with extensive division of labour and isolated workers using limited skills; neo-Fordism represents a transitional form in which workers are required to become flexible through the use of multiple skills and multiple tasks; post-Fordism, or flexible specialisation, occurs when these multiply-skilled and flexible workers are engaged in productive systems which depend upon teamworking rather than isolated individuals, and involve a reduction in the division of labour and some flattening of hierarchical authority, that is, developed responsibility for decision-making (e.g. semi-autonomous work groups).’

The value of this definition is that it presents a general basis for conceptualising the vast majority of contemporary employment. In other words, in the past 30 years or so, there have been significant changes in the nature of work and employment and an important consequence of this alleged change is that contemporary employers demand a more varied range of skills from prospective and current employees and likely to adopt more sophisticated forms of control than under pre-existing models of work organisation. In theory, this also suggests an end to an abundance of jobs suited to many people with Asperger syndrome – that is, jobs characterised by high-levels of certainty, where there is less need to be overly concerned with the ‘bigger picture’ and less need to negotiate social situations.

### *Teamworking and social disability*

At the heart of the widening of employee skills to meet the demands of evolving forms of work organisation is the increased emphasis on semi-autonomous ‘teamworking’ – and a shift to a way of working that is likely to cause major and ongoing problems for people with Asperger syndrome. With the rise of teamworking there is said to have been a clear shift from a top-down allocation of fragmented tasks to a broader specification of tasks required by the

employer, with the team ‘empowered’ to exercise collective wisdom to establish how a particular task should be executed (Procter et al., 2009). However, there is some debate about the evidence for such a deep-seated change to one particular aspect of work organisation, particularly in terms of the amount of power and discretion actually ceded to semi-autonomous work groups.

Indeed, it could be said that clear cut evidence for a wholesale shift and employer reliance on forms of work organisation strongly characterised by socially organised, semi-autonomous teamworking, who have more humanised experiences of work, is hard to find. What is easier to find is evidence to suggest the contrary. For instance, while 2004 Workplace Employment Relations (WERS) survey suggests more than 70 per cent of British workplaces organise core employees into designated teams, only six per cent of teams are autonomous to the point where the team can appoint its own leader (Kersley et al., 2006). To some this may suggest that teams and team leaders are merely new names for work groups and supervisors, or that employers pretend to be following new principles of autonomy, inter-dependency and co-operation, while at the same time silently adhering to the old, top-down, fragmented and individualised principles of Taylorism and Fordism (Fulop and Linstead, 2009). The WERS findings also link well to the earlier work of Harley (2001) who argued that teamworking does little if anything to challenge the dominant power structures in most work organisations. Many labour process studies, in effect, point towards most if not all employees having to abide by the ideals of teamworking, yet typically end up feeling disillusioned and complaining of abuse of flexibility or intensification of work pressures (Findlay *et al.*, 2000).

This in one sense points to broader difficulties for employees, yet more importantly it also points to specific and new problems for employees with Asperger syndrome. However, the problem though does not concern the ability of the person with Asperger syndrome to

understand the openly declared facts about teamworking and to apply this knowledge in a social situation. Instead, the concern is that it may not be easy for the person with Asperger syndrome to put together the many conflicting and hidden ‘facts’ of teamworking. As such, ‘teamworking’ has a clear potential to add a layer of stress to employee with Asperger syndrome.

### *Emergent forms of employer control*

A further central dimension to labour process analysis involves critiquing new and emergent attempts by employers to control how employees behave in order to meet primary organisational objectives, such as profit making or reaching targets. In such instances advocates of labour process analysis tend to display little regard for official accounts of employer control initiatives and are far more interested in what goes on in practice (Bolton, 20005). In this section further attention is given to the ‘devil in the detail’ of new and emergent forms of employer control, such as, advanced forms of selection, the physical working environment and ‘fun at work’ initiatives.

### *Selection and social disability*

It is evident that in line with new forms of general work organisation and the task allocation employers have also taken to using more advanced forms of selection to screen out applicants less suited to, for example, working in a team or on the often testing interface between employee and customer. While selection processes are commonly discussed in existing texts as being highly problematic for the prospective employee with Asperger syndrome (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007; National Autistic Society, 2005; Nesbitt, 2000), such texts do not really go into depth about why prospective employees have so many problems with advanced selection processes. Further, advanced selection methods tend to be described in such texts rather than being conceptualised in a wider organisational or market-based context. This is not

the case with labour process analysis, as contemporary forms of selection – such as, competence based interviews and personality testing, are typically seen and understood as sophisticated control mechanisms (Thompson and McHugh, 2009) and culturally bound to the values and beliefs and norms of the dominant culture (Noon and Blyton, 2007). Watson (2006), moreover, suggests that it is important to note how all parties to such practices do little to question, or find it almost impossible to challenge, the broader agenda of such processes, even when such practices are only marginally more useful than more traditional forms of selection. Taken together, it seems reasonable to suggest that future texts on Asperger syndrome and employment need to be more wary of official and managerialist justifications for increased use of advanced selection processes. Without this consideration it seems likely that advanced selection processes will continue to be highly problematic for prospective employees with Asperger syndrome. This is mainly because of support organisations' largely uncritical view of such practices, and employers' blind faith in processes that are often not fit for purpose and even less fit for increasing the employment prospects of people with Asperger syndrome.

#### *The physical work environment and social disability*

It is also apparent in the existing literature that the physical working environment is problematic for the employee with Asperger syndrome, particularly in terms of increasing the chances of over-sensitisation as a result of, for example, background noise and bright lights. However, as is the case with advanced selection processes, the existing literature on Asperger syndrome is not characterised by a developed critique of the contemporary physical working environment. Indeed, instead, there is a naïve optimism that characterises such texts in that employers need only be informed or educated more about how physical environments can lead to sensory overload and this will be one less battle to face in terms of increasing the



employment-related inclusion rates for people with Asperger syndrome. It is also to suggest the contemporary physical work environment is largely an inadvertent or benign phenomenon and therefore employers are likely to respond favourably to requests for changes.

Advocates of labour process analysis, however, increasingly see the contemporary physical working environment as ‘contested terrain’, in that we should question more than ever before employer motivation for, for example, ‘state-of-art’ working environments. For instance, Barnes (2007) believes no feature of the contemporary building structure should be exempt from labour process analysis. This is particularly the case when it comes to open plan offices and the décor of brightly lit, glass panelled, air conditioned call centres. More importantly, however, Houlihan (2002) suggests employers increasingly use state-of-art working environment to shape and control employee values. How this helps us with the problems associated with the exclusion of employees with Asperger syndrome is as follows. Firstly, it seems likely that the more an employer puts into designing a physical working environment the more an employer is likely to resist attempts to make changes to it to accommodate the needs of the employee with Asperger syndrome. This is likely to be all the more acute if the physical working environment is designed without recognising the sensory problems faced by many employees with Asperger syndrome. Secondly, there is the question of how well support workers are versed on the subtleties of, and the many hidden agendas behind, the contemporary physical working environment. Finally, the subtleties and many hidden agendas of the contemporary environment are also likely to cause a level of confusion for the employee with Asperger syndrome due to a larger propensity for seeing situations in black and white terms. For instance, unless appropriately supported, there is clear potential for the employee with Asperger syndrome to take a failure to do well in a state-of-art facility as a personal failure.

### *Fun at work and social disability*

‘Fun at work’ and ‘fancy dress’ day activities or ‘wild and wacky’ activities provided by external providers are not widely discussed in the extant literature on Asperger syndrome, yet such practices are increasingly common in many work settings and would certainly come under the broader social problems faced by many employees with Asperger syndrome. Where fun at work activities are mentioned there are reports of individuals with Asperger syndrome being completely exhausted by such activities (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007; Hendrickx, 2009) that many employees are at worst indifferent or cynical towards. The impression given in the extant literature, as is the case in previous examples, is that such practices are somehow benign, faddish and without any deep-seated or strategic purpose, and that when employers see the errors of their ways they will be receptive to accommodating the needs of the employee with Asperger syndrome.

However, even early studies on organised fun seem to suggest such practices are not ill-conceived and in reality specifically designed to be non-optional ways for employers to quell employee criticism and resistance to control (Bate, 1994), even though many employers insist such practices are harmless or natural. It has also been suggested that fun at work concerns the camouflaging of factory-like call centre employment (Kinnie et al., 2000). More recently studies have revealed further hidden agendas of fun at work practices. For instance, Bolton and Houlihan (2009) believe fun at work practices to be new ways for employers to get employees to work harder, conform and ‘act the part’. In general this suggests that many employers are unlikely to be overly receptive to requests for employees with Asperger syndrome to be exempt from such practices or allowed to opt out on a free and easy basis. This is because it is likely to be difficult for employers to make certain control strategies optional, even for a minority of employees, when such practices are absolutely central to how

the organisation meets its primary objectives. Further, where employees with Asperger syndrome are allowed to opt out of such practices there is a risk that fellow employees may be resentful of what could be viewed as favourable treatment. More specifically, such is the degree of opaqueness of fun at work practices, many employees with Asperger syndrome are unlikely to be able to focus on their main duties at the same time as having a laugh and joke with colleagues and playing out a costume-defined role.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Essentially, this article is an attempt to examine how the employment-related problems of people with Asperger syndrome can be reduced by bringing together theories of Asperger syndrome and theories of contemporary employment. Despite the fact that many employment-related problems are already documented in an eclectic range of literature, the view taken in this article is that steps taken to address many of these problems are unlikely to work well unless interventions reflect equally the theories that reflect the harsh realities of Asperger syndrome and the harsh realities of contemporary employment and work organisation. As such, the first part of this final section briefly summarises all the main points discussed so far. In the second and final part there will be a further discussion of the summarised information and what action that can be taken on the basis of this information.

In the first section of the article the main theories used to explain Asperger syndrome were discussed. This involved a discussion of concepts such as theory of mind, executive function and central coherence. Combined, the three psychological concepts allows health and educational professionals, as well as informed lay people, to get an understanding of the individual problems and challenges that the person with Asperger syndrome typically faces on an ongoing basis. A further discussion touched on the sensory problems that many people

with Asperger syndrome have to cope with, although some of this could simply be preferences and dislikes. Here it was seen how everyday sights, sounds and smells can lead to significant discomfort for many people with Asperger syndrome. Further, repeated over-sensitisation can also lead to more serious and difficult to resolve secondary mental health problems. A final section to this part of the article concentrated on the main positives associated with having Asperger syndrome. While the positives were many, it was also evident that positives were based on stereotyping people with Asperger syndrome and borderline condescending commentary. Such positives were also strongly characterised by deference to the psychological and individual views of disability. It was evident in this section that attempts to support people with Asperger syndrome in employment would be quite limited if support was designed entirely on this approach.

With the limitations of theories of Asperger syndrome in mind, the following section of the article shifted to a discussion of the sociology of contemporary employment, or the every-day contextual side to the problem. More broadly, this involved moving from one distinct view of disability to another. The discussion about the realities of contemporary employment provided insights into the problems faced by every person reliant on paid employment, yet the discussion also led to suggestions about how increasingly common features of contemporary employment could seriously undermine the employment-related experiences of people with Asperger syndrome. At the heart of such discussions was a suggestion that work is now increasingly organised in a very different fashion than it was just a generation or so ago. However, it was also noted that sociologists can only provide a general theoretical framework for the contemporary organisation of work, mainly because even when faced with similar external pressures, no two employers are likely to organise work and control employees in exactly the same manner. Further important issues that also arose in this discussion included how contemporary employment could be said to be made up of fresh and innovative practices,

yet also, typically omitted from the official language of contemporary employment, are employer practices and attitudes that have previously been linked to long periods of industrial disharmony. A problem here is that employers seem very much interested in emphasising what is 'new' and 'friendly' about the contemporary work organisation, yet steadfastly guarded about what is less so.

In terms of recent employer innovations in employer control a range of other noteworthy and generic issues emerged too. For instance, employers seem to be increasingly obsessed with nurturing a corporate culture through the use of sophisticated selection processes, physical working environments and employee engagement activities. However, it is important to note how the real intent in such practices is rarely communicated to employees, the practices are designed to foster sameness and unquestioning attitudes in employees, and the practices are designed to minimise employee or third party criticisms of such practices. According to the theories of Asperger syndrome, this is not good news for people with Asperger syndrome who are looking to take part in competitive labour markets and it is not good news for the third parties that hope to improve inclusion employment rates for people with Asperger syndrome. This is mainly because employment, according to theories of contemporary employment and work organisation, is an increasingly abstract, contradictory and complicated social affair. What this means is that future attempts to reduce the employment-related problems for people with Asperger syndrome should not be informed by lay, descriptive or anecdotal accounts of contemporary employment.

So what does all this mean in reality? First and foremost it should be noted that some of the employment-related problems of people with Asperger syndrome already discussed in this article are unlikely to be or partially resolved on the basis of what has been discussed so far. For instance, financial problems and poor design of transition from education to employment

programmes and broader employment support programmes, is largely a matter for external agencies, such as, voluntary organisations, relevant charities, local councils and central government. Employer ignorance is a major factor in the problem, but again largely a problem related to employers themselves, as well as a problem for external agencies responsible for making employment laws, enforcing employment laws and pressurising employers to abide by or go beyond minimum standards set out in employment law, e.g. lobbyist organisations specialising in Asperger syndrome and autism, trade unions, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Employment Tribunals, family and friends of people with Asperger syndrome. The structural problems inherent in the benefits system, for obvious reasons, are also matters beyond the scope of this article. Finally, all suggestions to help reduce employment-related problems must recognise that Asperger syndrome is a life-long condition and however a person's Asperger syndrome manifests, it cannot be educated, trained, managed or disciplined away. Likewise, employer organisations operate in increasingly competitive and uncertain markets, and therefore there will be limits, also depending on individual organisational circumstances, to how employer organisations can accommodate the needs of employees with Asperger syndrome. Having said that, it is evident that employers have gone to and continue to invest enormous amounts of time and money on technically and linguistically designing even the tiniest details of work organisation, yet it would, by comparison, take an absolute tiny fraction of that expertise, determination, time and money to make the typically basic adjustments often required of employees with Asperger syndrome.

What follows is aimed at a range of parties to the employment relationship. This range of parties includes anyone entrusted to support people with Asperger syndrome in employment-related situations, such as, human resource professionals, staff representatives, line managers, team members or colleagues and external support workers. The findings should be somewhat helpful for people involved in revising or formulating employment law, health and clinical

professionals aligned to Asperger syndrome, as well as academics interested in conducting future research on such matters. It should also, however, be of most importance to people who have Asperger syndrome, as many people with Asperger syndrome are more than capable of playing a large role in their own destinies.

Primarily, it needs to be recognised by all parties to reducing the employment-related problems of people with Asperger syndrome that contemporary employment is riddled with rhetorics and realities. Further, such rhetorics appear to make more acute the many individual problems of the person with Asperger syndrome. If anything, it could be said that hidden aspects to contemporary employment, such as subtle forms of control, teamworking and corporate culture initiatives, represent further and more complicated hurdles for the employee with Asperger syndrome and supporting parties to surmount. However, such rhetorics have been extensively researched and theorised (but typically not used by those currently aligned to reducing the societal problems of people with Asperger syndrome) and we should be confident that given the right circumstances, such research and theory could be used, with theories of Asperger syndrome, to challenge employers on how employees with Asperger syndrome are treated. What are also needed are people in work organisations (or external support workers) who are not trained to see contemporary employment in an idealised or corporatised manner and instead trained to be more critical of the nature of contemporary employment. Some may say this approach is unrealistic or idealistic, but would any professional or well informed enthusiast consider it best practice to try to and help someone with Asperger syndrome having only studied the rhetorics and half truths of Asperger syndrome? This could involve all manner of personnel, such as line management or human resource professionals, but would probably be a role best undertaken by a staff representative from within the work organisation supported, where relevant, by an external, specialist support worker. More realistically, what is needed is for experts on employment and work

organisation to play a far more central role in policy making and more specific recommendations on the design and implementation of support strategies. Ultimately, if there is little or no attempt by various parties to the problem to recognise and engage with what employment and work organisation is really like in the twenty-first century and to build policy and practice on such realities, then the employment-related problems for people with Asperger syndrome look set to persist if not deteriorate further.

## **End notes**

[1] There appears to be little evidence to suggest this figure has improved in the past ten years. If anything, it is likely to have gone up given the current economic crisis, public sector redundancies and the continued decline of routine, manual and manufacturing-based employment.

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